

Sri Lankan prime minister delivers menacing speech against working class

K. Ratnayake
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In an address to the nation on Monday evening, Sri Lanka Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse denied the government's responsibility for the country's economic and social catastrophe and issued a chilling warning to working people who are demanding that his brother, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, and the government resign.

The hurriedly announced speech broadcast on the *Derana* TV channel came as the government scrambled to stay in power. The ruling coalition holds a wafer-thin majority in parliament after 41 MPs declared that they would function independently of the government.

Hundreds of thousands of people are engaged in continuing protests across the island demanding that the president and the government "go home." Amid skyrocketing inflation, shortages of essential foods and fuel and power cuts, popular support for the protests is growing.

The prime minister cynically declared that he understood "the fatigue of the people" waiting in the queues and the "suffering of the people in the face of the skyrocketing price of goods." But the real purpose of his speech was to condemn the ongoing protests as a threat to democracy and demand their halt forthwith.

Rajapakse said: "The chant 'No to 225 in Parliament' today echoes through the streets. That immediately translates to a rejection of this democratic system. While it may sound good, I urge you to understand its danger from a historical perspective."

What democracy is Rajapakse talking about? Masses of people driven into the streets by anger and desperation are exercising their basic democratic right to oppose all of the 225 self-serving members of parliament—government and opposition alike. All of these capitalist politicians are responsible for decades of attacks on the social position and democratic rights of the working class.

The presidency and parliament have been the instruments for one attack after another on democratic rights. The current government has invoked the Essential Public Services Act to criminalize industrial action by workers demanding higher pay and improved conditions. It has unleashed the police

with tear gas and batons on students demonstrating in opposition to inroads into free education.

Freedom of expression is under constant threat with the arrest of journalists critical of the government. At the same time, the Rajapakse regime has arrested hundreds of Tamils and Muslims under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act, as it whips up reactionary Sinhala chauvinism in a bid to divide the working class.

The prime minister's invocation of history is a crude warning that the government is prepared to go far further and unleash a brutal reign of terror against the mass protests, as Sri Lankan governments have done in the past.

Rajapakse referred in particular to the anti-government movement that emerged among unemployed Sinhala youth in the south of the island in the late 1980s. The regime of President J. R. Jayawardene used the pretext of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's murderous attacks on political opponents and workers to let loose military-sponsored death squads that massacred an estimated 60,000 rural youth in a bid to stamp out anti-government unrest. The roads were lined with torched corpses to sow terror within the population.

The prime minister also referred to the emergence of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north of the island, which led to the country's 26-year communal war. Tamil youth only joined the LTTE and other armed Tamil groups out of deep-seated frustration with the anti-democratic and discriminatory policies towards Tamils and repeated pogroms by Sinhala chauvinist thugs. The response of successive Colombo governments was a bloody war that cost the lives of hundreds of thousands.

Mahinda Rajapakse, as president, and his brother Gotabhaya, as defence secretary, presided over the final brutal military offensives in 2009 that resulted in the indiscriminate slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and the rounding up of hundreds of thousands more in military-controlled detention camps.

The prime minister told his TV audience "to consider this carefully and protect our nation from once again slipping

into a time as dark as that in our history, through these actions.” This is a menacing threat, especially coming from a man with blood on his hands, not only against the protests but against the working class and rural masses as a whole.

Rajapakse also blamed protesters for the intensifying economic crisis, declaring, “Every second you protest on the street, our country loses opportunities to receive potential dollars.”

Whose dollars is Rajapakse speaking about? Certainly, it is not the money of workers and poor people who are desperately struggling to survive day by day. Many are near starvation, if not already starving, unable to obtain essential foods, not to speak of medicine and other basics of life.

The prime minister was speaking about the corporate and financial elite—the stock market speculators, business entrepreneurs and corporate CEOs—which has been hit by the economic crisis. These are the layers whose wealth soared during the pandemic as a result of the government’s criminal policy of allowing COVID-19 to spread through the population. The Rajapakse regime provided them with lavish tax cuts and handouts, funded by printing money in the name of stimulating the economy, while forcing workers to labour under unsafe health conditions.

Sri Lanka’s stock market rose to its historical highest point in January, with the index reaching 13,500, enabling speculators to reap fortunes. Sri Lanka’s nine top companies amassed 364 billion rupees (\$US1.8 billion) in earnings between April and June last year, collectively pocketing 21 billion rupees profit in the first quarter of their financial year.

As well as blaming the protesters, the prime minister blamed the pandemic, saying that the government protected the population. A lie! He also lamented the global economic situation, saying it had affected foreign earnings. In other words, everyone and everything—other than the government—is responsible.

While it is certainly true that the global economic crisis has hit Sri Lanka hard, the government is squarely responsible for imposing its burdens on working people as it sought to protect the profits of big business and the wealth of the super-rich.

The government is now preparing to impose more hardships as it goes begging to the International Monetary Fund for emergency handouts. Last week the newly appointed Central Bank governor declared that “political and social stability” was necessary to implement the IMF’s austerity policies, which will lead to even higher prices, higher taxes, greater shortages and large jobs losses, as state-owned enterprises are corporatized and privatized.

Mahinda Rajapakse has made absolutely clear how “political and social stability” will be achieved if protesters

do not heed his warnings. Reaction is again beginning to rear its ugly head in the form of threats of brutal state repression against the masses, who are campaigning to defend their economic and social rights.

When President Gotabhaya Rajapakse imposed a curfew and put soldiers and police on the streets on the weekend of April 2-3, mass protests defied the threat and the government backed down—temporarily. In its statement issued on April 7, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned that the regime was biding its time. The prime minister is now threatening to use state repression on a far broader and more violent scale.

To fight for its basic democratic and social rights, the working class needs its own democratic organisations. The SEP is calling for the formation of action committees in every workplace, factory and working class suburb, democratically elected and independent of the trade unions and every capitalist party.

The trade unions are the major impediment to the mobilization of the working class. Over the past two years, they have sold out every struggle of workers, saying they understand the country’s crisis. Last week, the public sector unions called a one-day strike to let off steam. The union leaders declared that they are for a government that “one can trust and rules based on the parliament”—that is, another capitalist government of the 225 parliamentarians.

The SEP has advanced a socialist program of action around which the working class can fight for its social and democratic rights and draw to its side the rural masses, who are also being hard hit. The action committees—organs of workers’ democracy—establish the foundations of a struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government—that is, a genuinely democratic government that can reorganize society on the basis of needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.

We urge our readers to join and build the SEP, which is the only party fighting for this program.



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